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ABSTRACT

As family structures have shifted to include a high proportion of single parent households, more attention has been directed toward the characteristics of both the maternal and paternal roles. A study was conducted to identify the nurturing qualities of parenthood in a sample of 51 presently unmarried, noncustodial fathers, and to determine the importance of these qualities relative to life satisfaction, self satisfaction, and perceptions of the quality of the family environment in the family of origin. Data were obtained using those segments of the Perception of the Parental Role Scales which identify and assess the nurturing qualities of the parental role. In addition, a comparison of single fathers with 119 married fathers and with 125 married mothers from an earlier study on the same dimensions of nurturing was obtained. The results indicated that these single fathers were highly nurturing and, when compared to both fathers and mothers in dual parent settings, showed greater concern about nurturing aspects of the parental role. These findings contradict the view that noncustodial fathers become less concerned about their children's emotional development. The results suggest that the nurturing traits of parenthood are independent of either marital status or sex of parents. This research has implications for family laws and public policy, child care and custody decisions, and for service providers in various family social programs.
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CAN FATHERS "MOTHER"?

THE NURTURING CHARACTERISTICS OF SINGLE PARENT FATHERS

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CAN FATHER'S "MOTHER"?
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to identify the nurturing qualities of parenthood in a sample of presently unmarried, non-custodial fathers, and to determine the importance of these qualities relative to life satisfaction, self satisfaction and perceptions of the quality of the family environment in the family of origin. Data were obtained using those segments of the Perception of the Parental Role Scales (PPRS) which identify and assess the nurturing qualities of the parental role (Gilbert and Hansen, 1983). Results indicate that single parent fathers are highly nurturing, and when compared to both fathers and mothers in dual parent settings, show greater concern about nurturing aspects of the parental role than either group in the dual parent family setting. These findings contradict the notion that fathers who do not live with their children become less concerned about their emotional development. The results further suggest that the nurturing traits of parenthood are independent of either marital status or sex of parent, thus having implications for family laws and public policy, child care and custody, and applicative value for service providers in various family related social programs.

INTRODUCTION

As the structure of the family has shifted to include a high proportion of single parent households, greater attention has been directed toward the characteristics of both the maternal and paternal roles. Because a disproportionate number of single parent households are female headed, research efforts have tended to focus upon the single parent mother, with considerably less effort directed toward the father. This has followed the earlier trend toward focus upon the characteristics of the mother-child relationship, again neglecting the role of the father in the development of the child. Consequently, relatively little is known about fatherhood, and about how fathers perceive their role.

Theoretical Framework

Individualists and structuralists differ in their answers to questions surrounding the possibility for fathers to be viable primary caretakers for children. Individualists (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Rossi, 1984) would argue that by adulthood men and women have developed very different personality characteristics which are, in large part, a consequence of their sex role socialization. Men become more competitive and work oriented while women are more nurturant and person oriented. Because of this socialization it is frequently assumed that women make better caretakers than do men.

Structuralists, on the other hand, reject the notion that

sex roles are assumed as personality traits (Kanter, 1977; Lorber, 1981; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). According to these theorists, biology is not necessarily destiny, but rather, differentiating parental behaviors of males and females are more aptly explained by adaptation to a particular situational context. Although mothers are expected to shoulder primary responsibility for childrearing, structuralism suggests that when this responsibility is shifted to fathers, they will adopt the necessary behaviors to complete the task, and these include the nurturing traits commonly ascribed to the female.

Thus, individualists and structuralists make very different predictions about the potential for successful childrearing in single parent, male headed households. Risman (1986) attempted to further clarify the predictive ability of either of these two theories as concerns single parent fathering. Her data conclude that childhood experiences and sex role socialization do not interfere with successful child rearing efforts by fathers, and that males can adapt to the mothering role. From these results it appears that the underlying assumptions of a structuralist view of male childrearing most aptly describe this phenomenon.

The Fathering Role

When parental roles were initially conceptualized and defined by Talcott Parsons (1955), the father was identified as having instrumental qualities which included discipline of the children and concern for economic well being as well as attention to the necessary functions of the relationship of the family to the larger society. Mothers were identified as bearing the responsibility for child rearing and emotional well being of all family members. The maternal role was the nurturing one, and it was expected that this trait was primarily female, much in tune with the "biology is destiny" perspective on social roles, responsibilities and expected behaviors. However, research efforts to test the validity of a dichotomized perception of the parental role failed to support a strong division between them. It appeared that the interaction between the family and the larger society was sufficiently complex to forbid a thorough assessment of the functions and responsibilities of parenthood independent of the social context (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This realization permitted a more careful analysis of the parental role for both mothers and fathers.

There is now a plethora of recent research concerned with various aspects of the father's role in child development from infancy through adolescence and young adulthood. The overriding conclusion is that fathers play a greater role in the growth and development of their children than initially believed (Lynn, 1974). Further, fathers do not view their fathering role as a secondary or superfluous one in the family (Tasch, 1952); however, in dual parent settings they tend to take insufficient advantage of the time available with their children. In general, children seem to prefer their mother over their father, most

likely because of the tendency for the mother to be more nurturing (Gardner, 1947; Nelson, 1971), which is an attractive trait. An interesting study (Schvaneveldt, Freyer, & Ostler, 1970) attempted to determine the traits of the "good" father and the "bad" father. Those traits which children attributed to the good father included nurturing qualities. Thus, it appears that nurturing qualities are important to parenthood, but are most commonly attributed to mothers.

The single parent father is a "special case" of fatherhood. He is a male without direct female input and perspective upon his fathering role. He is also socially disadvantaged because the prevailing norms regarding parenthood continue to regard the primary responsibility for child rearing as falling within the domain of female work.

The Nurturing Father

At present there is little research available which specifically addresses the nurturing traits of fatherhood, particularly for the single parent. An earlier study on perceptions of the parental role (Dail, 1986) found that, among dual parent families, there was close alignment between the mother and father on most aspects of child rearing, including the nurturing traits. In cases where mothers and father differed, the nurturing qualities were more strongly female than male. Mendes (1976), in a study of single fathers, found that fathers had definite concerns for the emotional well being of their children which came second only to supervision and security. Another study of single parent fathers found that these fathers feel capable and successful in their ability to be the primary parent of their children, but also experienced the role strain and other problems similar to single parent, female headed households (Orthner, Brown & Ferguson, 1976). Other studies of single parent fathers have clarified the notion that fathers feel capable of child-rearing and positive about making the attempt. In most cases, fathers in these studies had custody of their children and did not necessarily have a female present to assist with child rearing tasks.

The role of the non-custodial father has also been explored, most often in relationship to his feelings toward the child, rather than in an effort to discover how he perceives his role under the circumstances of his living situation with the child. A study by Fry and Thiessen (1981) confirm the general notion that the "week-end father" is unhappy with his situation relative to his children, and feels less closeness to them than do mothers. Other research has identified a sense of loss of control over fathering and lack of opportunity to actively parent as common to the non custodial father, leading researchers to conclude that fathers tend to loose interest in their children and become less concerned about their emotional well being if they are not directly associated with them on a continual basis (Gatley, 1983; Sayers, 1983).

Overall, assumptions regarding fatherhood tend to associate the role with motherhood in an opposing, complimentary relationship, and to correlate it with physical proximity to the child. However, it is possible that fathers can be nurturers independent of marital status, and to remain acutely concerned for the emotional well being of their children even though emotionality and nurturing are commonly ascribed as female traits. It is also possible that fathers will have concerns for these aspects of the child's development even though they are not the parent having physical custody.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The study being reported in this paper was designed to further explore the nurturing qualities of the fathering role specifically as concerns single, non-custodial fathers. The purpose was to identify specific nurturing qualities of parenthood, determine the degree of importance attached to these traits, and to relate these qualities to overall life satisfaction, self satisfaction and the perceived quality of the family environment of the family of origin for single fathers. In addition, a comparison of single fathers with married fathers and with married mothers on the same dimensions of nurturing was obtained. The research questions included:

1. What qualities of nurturance are perceived as important for single fathers?
2. How important are nurturing qualities to single fathers relative to married fathers and married mothers?
3. Is there a significant correlation between perceived nurturing, life satisfaction, self satisfaction and quality of family environment in family of origin?
4. Are there differences between those qualities of nurturing which include life skills and those which are directly concerned with emotionality?
5. How important is the parental role to single fathers relative to other aspects of their lives?

For this study, the dimensions of nurturing included the development of values, comfort, affection, attentiveness, emotionality and family life.

METHOD

Potential participants for this study were identified through the mailing list of an organization for single adults which exists in an urban/rural area of the midwestern United States. The only criteria for membership in the organization is to be presently unmarried and to pay yearly dues. The organization

has both male and female members.

Data were collected for the study using a mail back survey questionnaire which was initially mailed with a cover letter describing the study as an investigation into carious aspects of singlehood as a lifestyle. Two follow-up efforts were made to obtain completed questionnaires.

Sample

The sample for this study is a subsample of the larger study previously identified. The data represent responses for that portion of the male sample who are single, non-custodial fathers. The comparison data were obtained in an earlier study of perceptions of the parental role among dual parent families (Dail, 1986)

Instrument

Measurement of the nurturing traits of the parental role was obtained using those aspects of the Percention of the Patental Role Scales (Gilbert and Hansen, 1983) which specifically address the areas of concern. This instrument has an overall alpha reliability of .86. For the subscales used in this investigation, the reliabilities were reported as .88, .85, .85, .90, and .81, giving an overall reliability of .86 for that aspect of the instrument incorporated into this study.

A total of 16 items representing nurturance were used for this study, and each was rated on a 1-5 Likert type scale, with 5 being the score representing the highest value possible for that item. The items used included:

1. Helping the child to develop a set of values to live by
2. Teaching the child honesty
3. Comforting the child when h/she is upset or afraid
4. Listening to the child describe h/her activities
5. Giving the child attention
6. Teaching the child an awareness of the "rules of society"
7. Teaching the child to be affectionate
8. Teaching the child to compromise
9. Help the child to recognize the importance of famlily life
10. Hold the child
11. Teach the child how to win or loose graciously
12. Express affection toward the child
13. Provide emotional support for the child
14. Help the child learn to deal with sadness
15. Instill a sense of moral support for the family
16. Make the child feel important

These items were summed and a mean score for total nurturance was obtained. Items were also subdivided into an emotionality score (#'s 3,4,5,7,10,12,13,14,15,16) and a life skills score (#'s 1,2,6,8,9,11). Mean scores for each of these were used in

analysis of the data. The range of possible values for overall nurturing is 16-80; for emotionality 10-50; and for life skills 6-30.

Life satisfaction and self satisfaction were measured on a Likert Scale, with 1 being the most satisfied with self to 4 being very dissatisfied with self; and 1 being completely satisfied with life and 6 being completely dissatisfied. The overall quality of the family environment was also measured on a Likert Scale with 1 being very happy to 5 being very unhappy. Ratings of satisfaction with fatherhood and relationship with children were scaled from 1 being the most satisfied to 5 being the least satisfied. The role of father was ranked on a 3 point scale with 1 being the most important to 3 being the least important.

RESULTS

The overall response rate of males for this study was 53% (N=81); of those, 51 were fathers. This subsample represents 62% of the total number of respondents, and 33% of the potential sample total. The mean age was 45.6 years (S.D.=11.9). The average income level fell between \$11,000 and \$20,000/year; and the mean number of years of education was 13.62 years (S.D.=2.54). Fourteen of the respondents were categorized as having a professional occupation, 20 were semi-professional and 17 were nonprofessional. All respondents were caucasian and all were divorced and presently single. These fathers had a total of 140 children (X=2.74; S.D.=.91).

The demographic description of the comparison sample identifies parents (N=125 mothers; N=119 fathers) as all presently married, having a mean age of 27.43 (S.D.=4.0). The Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1977) places these families almost precisely in the middle range (X=34.86; S.D.=9.86) and socioeconomically comparable to the sample of single fathers. The mean number of children per family is 1.48 (S.D.=1.61).

Findings indicate that this sample of fathers is highly nurturing (X=76.5; S.D.=9.16). Fathers also scored high on the subscale of emotionality (X=45.52; S.D.=5.27) and life skills (X=27.03; S.D.=3.50). A t-test between emotionality and life skill scales was significant ($t(50)=40.29$; $p<.00001$), indicating that fathers perceived emotional nurturing to be more important than life skill related nurturing. The alpha reliability scores for this sample are .90 for emotionality, .86 for the life skill measure and .93 for the overall 16 item nurturing measure.

Table 1 illustrates a comparison between single fathers and married fathers on the dimensions of nurturing used for this study. ANOVA results identify those areas where significant differences are present. These include the teaching of affection ($F(1,167)=6.58$; $p<.01$); compromise ($F(1,167)=2.68$; $p<.09$); expression of affection ($F(1,167)=6.86$; $p<.009$); emotional

support ($F(1,167)=61.49$; $p<.0001$); dealing with sadness ($F(1,167)=31.02$; $p<.0001$); moral support of family members ($F(1,167)=16.71$; $p<.0002$); and making the child feel important ($F(1,167)=6.22$; $p<.01$). In all instances the single father scored higher on these dimensions of nurturing.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 2 illustrates the comparison between single fathers and married mothers on the same dimensions of the nurturing scale. ANOVA results indicate that fathers scored significantly higher than mothers in emotional support ($F(1,179)=41.61$; $p<.0001$); helping the child deal with sadness ($F(1,179)=25.66$; $p<.001$); and instilling a sense of moral support for the family ($F(1,179)=16.42$; $p<.0002$). Mothers scored significantly higher than fathers in concerns about comforting the child ($F(1,179)=2.99$; $p<.08$); listening to the child ($F(1,179)=6.18$; $p<.01$); giving attention to the child ($F(1,179)=11.88$; $p<.001$); and holding the child, ($F(1,179)=5.68$; $p<.01$). In all other aspects of nurturing there were no significant differences between married mothers and single fathers.

Insert Table 2 about here

Single fathers reported a mean self satisfaction score of 2.0 ($S.D.=.84$) indicating that they are "somewhat satisfied" with their life at present, and a mean life satisfaction score of 2.7 ($S.D.=1.01$) which falls between "generally" and "somewhat" satisfied. The quality of family environment in family of origin mean score was 3.06 ($S.D.=1.05$) indicating that these fathers perceived their family environment as "happy" as they were growing up.

Pearson correlation coefficients between the total nurturing score and life satisfaction, self satisfaction, and overall quality of family environment in the family of origin were also obtained. The correlation between nurturing and life satisfaction was $-.264$ ($p<.03$), suggesting that the lower the life satisfaction, the lower the nurturing score. The correlation between self satisfaction and nurturing was $-.251$ ($p<.03$), also suggesting the lower the sense of self satisfaction, the lower the nurturing score. The overall quality of the family environment in the family of origin was positively correlated ($.150$; $p<.15$) with nurturing score, but was not statistically significant.

These single, non-custodial fathers described their relationship with their children as falling between very satisfied (warm, caring and supportive) and moderately satisfied (caring, but not too involved), having a mean of 1.5 ($S.D.=.64$). Satisfaction with the fathering role under their present circumstances was rated as 2.59 ($S.D.=1.1$) indicating a point between moderately satisfied and satisfied. A measure of the perceived importance of the fathering role for single fathers indicated that the role is highly important ($X=1.5$; $S.D.=.68$).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to further understand how single, non-custodial fathers perceive the nurturing qualities of the parental role. The critical question proposed by the study addressed the possibilities for single fathers to nurture children, and the answer appears to be yes. Fathers in this study considered the nurturing traits of parenthood to be very important, and in some cases more important than did either fathers or mothers in dual parent family settings; and although it was beyond the scope of this study to determine if fathers actually behaved in a nurturing way toward their children, identification of these traits as being present for fathers and apparently highly significant to their perception of the paternal role is a critical first step toward actual expression of these traits behaviorally.

The finding of high interest in nurturing begs the question of the relationship of this trait to gender. As noted earlier, individualists believe that personality characteristics, which include the ability to nurture, are largely a result of sex role socialization. Thus, it would be expected that women would be highly nurturing; however, the quality is not often expected within the realm of male behaviors. Since these fathers exhibit this quality, one can conclude that the ability to nurture may be less susceptible to socialization than previously believed. It is possible to posit from the present findings that the ability to nurture may be instinctual and independent of gender. If so, single males are able to adjust to the emotional demands of childrearing and to adopt the behaviors necessary to accomplish the task. The negative correlation between nurturing and life/self satisfaction suggests that the lower the life/self satisfaction, the lower the interest in nurturing, and supports the notion that nurturing ability is related to life and self satisfaction, but possibly not to gender or sex role socialization.

The single fathers in this sample report being at least moderately satisfied with their fathering role and regard the role as very important to them. This refutes earlier research findings which suggest that when parents divorce, non-custodial fathers lose interest in their children. It is also possible that the satisfaction with the role is directly related to the high concern with the emotional characteristics of the role. Most students of human nature agree that emotional satisfaction is a strong determinant of satisfaction with relationships. Perhaps because these single fathers have no female partner to depend upon to assume the nurturing traits of the parental role, they have developed this aspect of the role for themselves and found it to be highly satisfying, adding a positive dimension to the instrumental traits already present.

Although this study strongly supports the nurturing ability of single parent fathers, maintaining the parental role under the circumstances of singlehood is difficult for most men since their children are most commonly in custodial and living circumstances which do not permit or encourage frequent or easy contact. However, since we now have research based information which indicates that fathers can "mother", it is important to assist them in accomplishing this task. There are many possibilities for providing the necessary supports to enable single fathers to be primary and successful caregivers of their children. These include:

1. Assistance with conceptualization of the role for fathers. Many men do not conceive of themselves as nurturers, and it is important to "raise their consciousness" in this regard.
2. Understanding the normal sequelae and expectations of child development. Because many men do not conceive of themselves as primary caregivers of their children, they do not familiarize themselves with what can be expected of children as they grow and develop.
3. Assistance with managing the everyday tasks of family life, much as a single parent mother must do. These include child care, household chores, time management, etc. Many fathers might be more likely to be more involved with their children and take greater responsibility for them if they could understand how to manage the accompanying circumstances which arise when children are present in the household.
4. Social supports for the single parent father which include group experiences and various other sources of information and positive feedback about "mothering" for men. This includes attention to the social stereotypes about masculinity and femininity.
5. Assistance with reconceptualization of the role to incorporate as much nurturing as possible into the context in which the role is to be performed (e.g. under circumstances of separate residence)
6. Attention to issues of public policy as pertains to child custody decisions. It is important that fathers know and understand how to use the judicial/family court system to assist them in becoming more active parents. This begins by believing that they can, in fact, parent their children.
7. Understanding of the new relationship that divorced spouses have to each other. The role of parenting children is independent of the role of spouse, and both parents need to come to terms with this issue before truly successful single parenting can occur.

There is little doubt that fathers can "mother" and can do so

quite successfully. However, gaps remain in the ability of social system to assist fathers in this endeavor. It appears that the nurturing of children is sufficiently important to fathers to warrant further attention to the phenomenon.

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Table 1

A comparison of single father's and married fathers' responses to questions about the nurturing qualities of parenthood

Variables	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	F	Sig*
1. Help child develop a set of values to live by.	4.76	0.69	4.66	0.66	0.78	0.3910
2. Teach child honesty.	4.90	0.42	4.88	0.32	0.10	0.7539
3. Comfort child when s/he is upset or afraid.	4.70	0.51	4.57	0.62	1.77	0.1815
4. Listen to child describe his/her activities.	4.56	0.54	4.54	0.72	0.02	0.8718
5. Give child attention.	4.58	0.54	4.60	0.68	0.04	0.8359
6. Teach child an awareness of the "rules of society."	4.36	0.83	4.22	0.79	1.07	0.3018
7. Teach child how to be affectionate.	4.42	0.78	4.04	0.90	6.58	0.0108*
8. Teach child how to compromise.	4.36	0.78	4.14	0.83	2.68	0.0992*
9. Help the child to recognize the importance of family life.	4.44	0.78	4.33	0.76	0.71	0.4101
10. Hold child.	4.49	0.89	4.41	0.82	0.34	0.5693
11. Teach child how to win or lose graciously in interactions with others.	4.32	0.87	4.19	0.79	0.94	0.3536
12. Express affection toward child.	4.72	0.61	4.39	0.79	6.86	0.0094*
13. Provide emotional support for child.	4.76	0.56	3.48	1.09	61.49	0.0001*
14. Help child learn to deal with sadness.	4.46	0.84	3.64	0.89	31.02	0.0001*
15. Instill in child a sense of moral support for family members.	4.38	0.88	3.76	0.90	16.71	0.0002*
16. Make child feel important.	4.58	0.88	4.20	0.91	6.22	0.0130*

Table 2

A comparison of single fathers' and married mothers' responses to questions about the nurturing qualities of parenthood

Variable	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	F	Sig *
1. Help child develop a set of values to live by.	4.76	0.69	4.77	0.51	0.01	0.9183
2. Teach child honesty.	4.90	0.42	4.95	0.21	1.28	0.2577
3. Comfort child when s/he is upset or afraid.	4.70	0.51	4.83	0.42	2.99	0.0816 *
4. Listen to child describe his/her activities.	4.56	0.54	4.77	0.48	6.18	0.0133 *
5. Give child attention.	4.58	0.54	4.84	0.42	11.88	0.0011 *
6. Teach child an awareness of the "rules of society."	4.36	0.83	4.29	0.75	0.30	0.5909
7. Teach child how to be affectionate.	4.42	0.78	4.55	0.64	1.24	0.2653
8. Teach child how to compromise.	4.36	0.78	4.43	0.70	0.29	0.5947
9. Help the child to recognize the importance of family life.	4.44	0.79	4.59	0.61	1.74	0.1854
10. Hold child.	4.49	0.89	4.75	0.52	5.68	0.0172 *
11. Teach child how to win or lose graciously in interactions with others.	4.32	0.87	4.43	0.67	0.81	0.3827
12. Express affection toward child.	4.72	0.61	4.65	0.68	0.39	0.5409
13. Provide emotional support for child.	4.76	0.56	3.83	0.96	41.61	0.0001 *
14. Help child learn to deal with sadness.	4.46	0.84	3.68	0.95	25.66	0.0001 *
15. Instill in child a sense of moral support for family members.	4.38	0.88	3.83	0.79	16.42	0.0002 *
16. Make child feel important.	4.58	0.88	4.43	0.78	1.23	0.2674

END

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